# The "TANKS"

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By

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# THE "TANKS"

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*"The truth; nothing but the truth; but not the whole truth."*

ON a certain Friday in September, 1916, after two years of fighting, when it might have been thought that human ingenuity in the art of killing had been exhausted, a fresh engine of war was suddenly sprung upon a world sick of hearing of new methods of slaughter. A day or two later, so soon as the newspapers were able to give some information about this development, the word "Tank" was on all British lips, and since that moment has probably been spoken, written, and printed more often than during the whole previous period since its incorporation into the English language.

This prosaic little word, also, has by its association with one of the most striking episodes of the World War and one of the few technical surprises which the Allies

1 3 76

have so far sprung on their enemies, and by the fact that its novel application signalised the birth of a new Arm, been invested with a romantic meaning of which it can never be deprived. The machine it describes is no ephemeral weapon of occasion—the materialisation of a happy thought for one special operation. Whatever the countermeasures it may call into being, and although its present immature shape may be as remote from its eventual perfection as "Puffing Billy" from a compound decapod freight locomotive, the Tank has come to stay. That Friday in September, 1916, marked a step forward. It was the beginning of an era in which dwindling Manpower will force more and more into prominence the necessity for the conservation of life, and in which the power and insensibility of machinery will have to be as fully exploited upon the field of battle as they have been in that of industry.

It is not only in English that the word suddenly acquired importance and an entirely fresh significance, for it has enriched the military vocabularies of many other languages, including German, which have borrowed it in its new sense. And curious as it is to British ears to hear "Tank" pro-

nounced by Frenchmen, Russians, Italians, and Roumanians, it would probably sound yet more strange to Americans, in whose slang it has a meaning quite unknown even amongst the most bibulous over on this side.

Whilst on the subject of this name, it may not be out of place to satisfy general curiosity as to a minor detail by answering the question, "Why 'Tank'?" Why should a fighting automobile have been so inappropriately named? The reply can be given in two words—for secrecy. In its experimental stage the machine was known as a "Land-cruiser" or "Land-ship." But it is a military platitude that the "element of surprise"—as it is always called in the text-books—has immense value in war; and it was naturally realised that the greatest results to be expected from the employment of this new weapon would be attained if it could be launched unexpectedly, so that the enemy might be caught unprepared to meet it. And when it crystallised into a definite shape, and reached the stage of production, it became obvious that its original names were far too suggestive of the real thing. It was therefore decided to christen it by some non-committal word which would give no inkling of its nature to those not "in the

know," and would, at the same time, be sufficiently descriptive and short to be readily adopted by all legitimately concerned.

Quite a large part of the earlier stage of manufacture would consist of the rolling of steel plates and their assemblage and erection into boxes, which to all except those who made a close examination might well be intended for vessels to hold water, petrol, or oil. The fact that the boxes would be bullet-proof would merely lend colour to the idea that they might be intended to move up into the fighting zone. This theory would not necessarily be discredited even when the stage of fitting them with engines and caterpillar tracks was reached. It would not be until the time for mounting the armament that the real purpose must become plain, up to which moment an *alias* might to some extent conceal it. "Reservoir" and "Cistern" were long-winded and clumsy; "Tank" was equally accurate and shorter. And "Tank" it became. As a matter of fact, various rumours about the new machines were current amongst those who got wind of them. One was that they were intended to carry water for the troops across the deserts of Egypt and Mesopotamia. A

second hinted at snow-ploughs for use on the Russian front. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that no special trouble was taken to contradict these yarns. It was also bruited about that experiments had been made in some wild-cat scheme which had failed absolutely.

The idea that this name would "catch on" was justified beyond anticipation. Employed as a bluff during the stage of production and training, it stuck. It was adopted by the troops at the Front and by the public at home, whose enthusiasm was aroused by the dramatic appearance and success of the new weapon, and whose fancy was tickled by its title. It thus obtained further sanction and was introduced to the whole world. In England the Tank became a popular gag in the Revues, a subject for songs and the *motif* of dances. The word was, in fact, almost run to death.

One good point common to both the German home-made equivalent terms is that they do not lend themselves to the making of lyrics, for neither "*Panzerkraftwagen*" nor "*Schützengrabenvernichtungsautomobil*" is likely to be used as the refrain of a topical song in vaudeville.

The machines were yet otherwise mis-

called. During the summer of 1916 an enemy agent trying to tap the wires in England might have been mystified to pick up some such message as: "Twelve Willies reach you to-day," or: "Send tails for six females." "Willie," a pet cognomen adopted as suitable for the telephone and obviating the use of a code for telegrams, was suggested by the fact that the first experimental "Landship" completed, though equally malevolent, was smaller and less powerful for evil than its immediate successor—eventually the type adopted. When the two creatures were together they gave the ludicrous impression of being child and parent of a monstrous and evil brood. Hence, naturally, "Little Willie" and "Big Willie." The "Big Willies" were also somewhat unbiologically classified as males and females, according to their armament. Incidentally, to help to conceal the destination of the Tanks at the stage when any illusion as to their purpose was precluded, they were painted with the inscription: "With care. To Petrograd," in large Russian characters. This, of course, was merely following up the line suggested by the snow-plough fiction.

During transportation secrecy was maintained in various ways. Whilst being con-

veyed by rail—a process to which they lend themselves admirably—the Tanks were concealed under tarpaulins. They were also always loaded up after dark; and on those nights when Willies were being despatched, the scene on the manœuvre ground, "somewhere" in England, was almost Dantesque. The train of flat trucks and special length of side-track were brilliantly lit up by acetylene flares; and out from the gloom, into the circle of light and back again into the outer dark, over glistening mud or through shimmering clouds of dust, continually crawled a procession of slug-shaped monsters, purring, panting, and emitting flames as they slid over the ground.

This operation, which happened to be repeated several times during the Zeppelin Raid season, was on one occasion interrupted by some of the aerial marauders, whose visit added considerable excitement to the proceedings. Entrainment was in full blast when suddenly a signal was given. At once every light in the loading yard was extinguished, and every Tank froze to stillness where it stood, darkness and uncanny silence taking the place of glare and the throbbing bustle of work. After a few minutes of tense expectancy, by the time that the ear

had been able to attune itself to the change from clamour to peace, a faint humming noise made itself heard afar off on high. The sound approached, grew louder, and gradually changed to a high-pitched purring, which seemed to fill the whole sky as a Zeppelin droned up overhead and circled above the stationary machines in the "Tankodrome" like a night owl quartering a field of corn above a colony of paralysed field-mice. No hint was given, however, to betray to the Hun skipper that directly underneath him lay a collection of new and secret weapons for the slaying of his "*Gebrüderei*" —a nest of scorpions in store for his "*Kameraden*" on *terra firma*, which, even to his mind, might have seemed a target worthier of high explosive than sleeping women and children; and after a few minutes the airship sailed away to unload its murderous cargo of bombs at a point some miles distant. Thrice was this visit repeated during the night—whether by the same Zeppelin or by others it is not easy to say. Finally, after a respectful interval, up went the lights, the Tanks came back to life, and the circus performance proceeded.

It was a curious phase of modern war as waged in three dimensions.

That all the care and precautions taken were successful in their object is now a matter of history. Though the Germans apparently had a suspicion that some surprise was in preparation, they had no knowledge of its nature until a day or two before the Tanks were "let out of the bag," when their aviators reported certain objects that looked like armored motors at certain places behind our lines. Beyond this they were unprepared, and had taken no special measures to meet the attack, which, after all, was the business end of the matter.

So much for nomenclature and mystery-making. The reader will have become impatient for the writer to: "Cut the cackle and come to the 'osses," or, in other words, to "cut it out." Unluckily, however, most of what can be said amounts to little more than cackle. It is in the circumstances impossible to present, even to the public of a nation which is fighting the common foe, more than a very incomplete account, lacking in information and details on the very points upon which an accurate statement of facts would be most enlightening and welcome. And it is obvious that this must be so when a weapon actually in use is the subject of discussion, more especially when it is

still in its infancy and owes a great part of its potentialities for the future to whatever of its nature and capabilities still remains unknown to the enemy.

Were it not for such limitations, it would be instructive to describe the mechanical evolution of the Tank from its embryonic stage until the actual monster, complete in its then form, loomed up through the mist on the morning of the 15th of September and amidst the laughter of our infantry heaved its bulk across the crater-pitted surface of No Man's Land toward the startled Huns. For other reasons, also, it is not yet possible to give an account of the fight waged against apathy, inertia, and other obstacles, which, though merely a repetition of the history of the struggle for life of every other invention that has forced its way into existence for the benefit of a conservative and unimaginative race, possesses its own special interest. Of the genesis of the machine, the need for it, the reasons that suggested the possibility of its construction, and the general *rôle* it was designed to play, something can be written. But no such light can be thrown on the points of how far in practice it came up to expectations, to what extent and in what direc-

tions it failed to do so, and what lessons for the future its performance has afforded. These are particulars upon which indiscreet disclosures might give information of the utmost value to an enemy, who, alert and enterprising enough, has not had the practical experience which we have bought and paid for in cash, brains, and lives.

Novel to the present generation as is the Tank, the basic principle underlying it—*i.e.*, the provision of collective protection to troops attacking, and therefore on the move—is not new. It has exerted its influence ever since the time when engines capable of throwing large numbers of missiles took their place in warfare. The present machine is the result of evolution, through intermediate stages, as mechanical science has grown, of old prototypes, such as the Roman Testudo, or Tortoise, and the mediæval Belfry, used in siege operations, in which the missile-throwing power of the defence gradually forced on the attack the adoption of some form of mobile protection. The reason for its production is the same (making allowance for development) as that which was responsible for the Tortoise of old—the great fire-power of the defence, of recent years greatly intensified by the introduction

of the machine-gun. The possibility of producing it is due to the perfection of the internal-combustion engine, to which also the ordinary automobile, the aeroplane, the submarine, and the airship owe their existence.

Ever since the appearance of the magazine rifle the advantage that would be conferred on the attack by employing a moving armored shield, fort, or cupola has indeed been so obvious that a vague consciousness of it has probably at some time or other formed the subject of the day-dreams even of those not directly concerned with war, but happening to posssess some knowledge of military history and mechanics and to be blessed with imagination. Since the introduction of the machine-gun, and the more recent appearance of the armored motor car of the ordinary wheeled type, the concrete idea of constructing some such engine has occurred to the minds of many more, especially to engineers.*

But, as the Bible has it, "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire," or, in other words, it is one thing to dream and another to convert a dream into

*M. Albert Robida, both in his writings and pictures in "La Caricature," predicted the use of Tanks in 1883. ["Strand Magazine," June, 1917.]

actuality. And it would, no doubt, be of human interest to make some reference to the personal element and the share of responsibility attributable to individuals for the realisation of what has long been a subject of aspirations. This, however, is neither the time nor the place to do it. The subject has already been rendered controversial by the contradictory statements and the various claims for the credit of the invention which have appeared in the Press. It will be touched upon here only on broad lines, the truth being that several people have been concerned to a greater or lesser degree at different stages, though the merit of inventing some of the crucial mechanical details can definitely be ascribed to individuals.

Nevertheless, one assertion has been publicly made by a writer of eminence and weight, which must be refuted. Mr. H. G. Wells, who prophesied to the world the arrival of such a monster as the Tank so long as thirteen years before it appeared, and who, in his "War and the Future," published in 1917, gives an excellent description of the existing machine, and a most illuminating imaginative forecast of its future evolution, both implies and states spe-

cifically in that book that the Tanks have not come from military sources but have been thrust upon the soldiers from without.

This is a sweeping indictment of a whole class, reiterated complacently and with apparent satisfaction, but incorrect and presumably based on ignorance of the facts.

It is true that certain people who are not soldiers have played a very large and valuable part in creating the Tank. It is also true that others who are soldiers have not done so. But the first to appreciate the necessity for it, to urge its provision, and to insist on the feasibility of its construction, were, in fact, soldiers. This point is emphasised, not because it is either remarkable or praiseworthy on the part of any men that they should be the first to realize the need for an obvious development connected with their own profession, but in justice to those who can neither make speeches nor write to the Press to defend themselves against misstatements, even when publicly made. Moreover, those soldiers who gave the impulse for this innovation did so without any knowledge of Mr. Wells' brilliant forecast written in 1903. No disparagement or depreciation of others is intended by this statement of fact.

So far as the writer is aware, the first definite proposal for a fighting machine on the lines of the existing Tank was due to the appearance of the Hornsby-Ackroyd Caterpillar Tractor, which was tested for military traction purposes in England in 1906-1908. It was made by a military officer, and was carried up to the stage of the preparation of sketch drawings, when the project died for want of support. Like Mr. Wells, he was ahead of his time.

Independently, without knowledge on their part of the previous abortive effort, a similar idea took shape in the minds of some other soldiers at the very beginning of the war; and it will specially interest the American reader to learn that it was on this occasion inspired by an invention from the country in which new ideas are supposed always to be welcome. In July, 1914, it became known that there was in existence an automobile for agricultural purposes, propelled on the caterpillar principle, which was possessed of quite unusual powers of crossing rough ground and traversing obstacles. This was the Holt Tractor, made in Peoria, Ill., U. S. A. The accounts of the performances of this machine, constructed for haulage and not specially for climbing, sug-

gested that one similarly designed especially to travel across country would, except in speed, have all the value of the existing armored motor cars without their limitations.

The immediate incentive to action on the part of those responsible for the Tank "Movement," therefore, was the fact that the construction of such a machine at last seemed to be a practical proposition. Even its most ardent backers, however, did not then fully realize how great the need for it was. The war had not lasted long, however, before this was made abundantly clear.

With their proverbial thoroughness, the Germans had not only studied the Russo-Japanese war, but had turned their studies to good account. One of the outstanding lessons of that struggle was the great value of machine-guns on the defensive, especially exemplified in the battle of San-de-Pu and at Port Arthur. And, in preparation for the conflict they had good reason to know was coming, the Germans had, either in accordance with the deductions made, or as a result of their own experiments, secretly provided themselves with thousands of these weapons, and trained a large body of picked troops to man them. It is stated that the total number in their possession in August,

1914, amounted to upwards of 50,000. The worth of these guns was very soon proved, firstly, in the attack and then in the defensive, both in delaying rearguard actions conducted by detachments, and in protracted resistance carried out by large forces. Every offensive undertaken by the Allies on the Aisne and afterward bore witness, in the toll of balked assaults and infantry losses, to the stopping power of these weapons, and justified the astuteness of the enemy General Staff. Each attack also showed their comparative invulnerability, even in hastily-constructed defences, to the artillery which was available against them. Indeed, it may be said that the murderous power of the machine-gun when used lavishly and with skill—and the Germans are artists in handling it—came as a revelation to their enemies.

As time went on, as the operations assumed the character of siege warfare, and as the Germans had time to erect miles of barbed wire and other obstacles the effectiveness of their machine-guns was greatly increased. In proportion, also, as the defences, including the dug-outs and shelters for these guns, were elaborated, did the immunity of the latter from artillery fire keep

pace more or less with the gradually increasing weight and number of the Allied guns. This progressive improvement of the defences continued until the machine-guns were ensconced in caverns and galleries 30 feet below ground-level during bombardment, and brought up only at the last moment for a point-blank *battue* of the attacking infantry.

But long before the latter stage was reached it had been brought home to the protagonists of the Tank that they were right. It became increasingly obvious that to launch assaults against the defence as organised by the enemy, unless the positions were first blown to dust, was merely to throw the infantry into a maze of barbed wire in which they would be caught helpless as flies on "tanglefoot" and mown down by rifle or machine-gun fire at short range poured in from different directions; or, if they were successful in getting over the wire into a trench, to subject them to enfilade fire from the same weapons placed for that object. It was established that, at all events until the British artillery increased in strength to a degree that would enable it effectively to cut the entanglements on the front of assault and blast the defences into

shapeless mounds, it was essential to employ some moving bullet-proof device which could not only climb forward and forge its way through uncut wire, but could knock out machine-guns in a straight fight. The offensive side of the projected machine then assumed greater importance; and it was realised that the Tank should primarily be a machine-gun destroyer.

If it be asked, therefore, what single factor was most instrumental in forcing the Tank into being, it can be said that it was the logical exploitation by the Germans of the machine-gun, usually the Maxim, probably the most efficient weapon of wholesale destruction ever created.

There is an English proverb which commends as a cure "A hair of the dog that bit you." And it is an interesting fact, though hardly a coincidence, if national inventive characteristics be borne in mind, that one of the most deadly man-killing machines, which the world owes to the genius of one American, the late Sir Hiram Maxim, should have found its antidote in a device directly inspired by the invention of a compatriot—Mr. Benjamin Holt.

A word of general description and a few more upon the functions of the Tanks. They

are powerfully- engined armed automobiles, enclosed in a bullet-proof casing for the protection of their crews. Propelled on the caterpillar principle, they possess considerable powers of travelling over rough ground, both in crossing trenches, craters, and other cavities, and climbing over raised obstacles, such as parapets, can tear their way without difficulty through wire entanglements, can uproot largish trees, and can throw down the walls of ordinary dwelling-houses. Nevertheless, in spite of their elemental strength and apparent clumsiness, in the hands of skilled drivers they are as docile as trained elephants under their own mahouts.

As has been said, they are divided into males and females. The male is *par excellence* the machine-gun hunter and destroyer. He carries light, quick-firing guns capable of firing shell, and is intended to be to the machine-gun what the torpedo-boat destroyer was designed to be to the torpedo boat, or the ladybird is supposed to be to the aphis. The female, which, in accordance with the laws of Nature, is the man-killer, carries nothing but machine-guns for employment against the enemy *personnel.* Her special *rôle* is to keep down hostile rifle fire, to beat back counter-attacks and rushes of

infantry, and to act generally as a consort to her lord and master.

Both sexes, however, are heavy weights endowed with great brute force, and share, in common, the attribute of being able to roll out and flatten machine-guns and their emplacements. Both, therefore, act as protectors to infantry, insomuch as they can destroy or "blanket" the one thing which has, so far, proved its greatest bugbear in the attack. Moreover, every Tank that goes forward, whether actually moving or disabled, assists the infantry near it in another way. It bulks above them and is the centre of attraction. It acts as a magnet for the bullets of the hostile machine-guns, and collects them to itself as Arnold von Winkelried is supposed in 1386 to have drawn to his own body the spears of the Austrians at the battle of Sempach. Every bullet that clangs against its steel sides is one less aimed at the infantry. Each silvery star splashed on its hide is the signature of one that has not drilled its way through the body of an infantry soldier.

To be the nurse, protector and backer of the attacking infantry, who, in the vernacular, "always get it in the neck," was the *motif* underlying the action of the new arm.

As it was expressed in the exhortation given to the officers and men going forth to take their machines into battle for the first time, whatever mistakes might be made, whatever mischances might befall, if the Tanks gave reason for their comrades on foot to thank God for their presence, they would have justified their existence.

It has been justified.

It is true that in any consideration of their employment too much importance must not be attached to some of the results of their first appearance, for certain influences then came into play which can never again have quite the same effect. Against the Germans they had all the advantages of being a surprise, and, by their strangeness and the apparently irresistible nature of their advance, inspired terror. On our own infantry, on the other hand, their almost equally unexpected *début*, and their abnormality, had quite the contrary effect. It was a relaxation of tension, and a reaction which had its own particular value. The very grotesqueness of the machines, their ungainly, indescribable method of progress, their colouring—surpassing in weirdness the sickliest fancies of the most rabid Cubist—were in reality great moral assets. They

supplied the touch of comic relief, and excited the mirth of the British soldiers, always blessed with a keen sense of the ridiculous. They acted as an antidote to the effect of the Jack Johnsons, Weary Willies, Silent Susies, Whizz Bangs, Sausages, Rum Jars, Tear Shells, Gas Shells, and all the other frightfulness of the unspeakable Boche. They counteracted the weariness, the hunger and thirst, the dust, the mud, and all the squalor and filthy discomfort of war. As has been related in the accounts published at the time, it was a laughing, cheering crowd of infantry which in many cases followed the Tanks forward on the 15th September. On the other hand, the new engines underwent their baptism of fire, and there were failures due to this, which should not recur.

Some of these results were produced by the factor of novelty, and are already discounted. But the solid material value of the Tanks to the infantry remains.

Mr. Frederick Palmer, the celebrated American war correspondent with the British Army, has estimated that in the latter stages of the battle of the Somme the intervention of the Tanks—though many machines failed from mechanical and other

defects—saved some 20,000 British lives, and subsequent estimates of the quality of the assistance rendered by them during May, 1917, are similar. But the most convincing proof of the difference made by their intervention is ocular, and is afforded by the "pattern" of the field of battle over which a British attack has passed. Where Tanks have accompanied the advance and have been able to "eat up" the enemy machine-guns left over by our bombardment, the bodies of our infantry strew No Man's Land irregularly, here and there. Where Tanks have not been used, in some places the bodies can be seen to be lying in front of the enemy's machine-gun "nests" and strong points in swathes like cut corn; in a series of high-water marks showing where the successive waves of the assault have met and been petrified by the death-dealing spray of the German Maxims.

And not only have the Tanks saved life by the moral effect of their approach and the number of machine-guns put out of action. They have themselves taken an active part in killing, on some occasions, indeed, having played the leading *rôle* in what might be called a "Butcher's Dream."

That the Germans appreciate the signifi-

cance of the new development is clear from the instructions issued, and the elaborate protective measures taken by them. And in spite of the ridicule usually poured on the new weapon by their newspapers—the object of which is plain—articles do occasionally appear which sound another note. For instance, Lieutenant-General Baron von Ardenne stated in the "Berliner Tageblatt" that:—

> "These powerful armoured cars, which were first used by the British, are undoubtedly the most wonderful weapons which modern tactics have revealed in warfare. . . . ."

But the purpose of this account is neither to glorify nor to justify the Tanks; its object is merely to impart a little information which may be of interest to those afar off who have not been in a position to obtain it.

This, the latest engine of war, has, of course, its limitations. For instance, Tanks alone, in their present state of development, cannot push matters to a decision nor win a great action. That must still be done, as in the past, by the infantry—the "Queen of Battles." But "Behemoth," clad in his bullet-proof skin, and urged onward by the power of scores of horses, laughs at entagle-

ments, whilst machine-guns are his "meat." His main object cannot be too often or too strongly emphasised; other, ancillary, duties need not be specified here. To the infantry soldier attempting to force his way by his own puny strength, through mud or dust and groves of barbed wire, his body naked to every kind of missile, but more especially to the sleet of lead which whistles horizontally across No Man's Land, he is the mechanical big brother armed with the punch and the big stick.

A parting message, and a grip from a friendly hand. This little book may perhaps be read by some of the "boys" from Massachusetts, Oregon, Texas, Pennsylvania, or other States of the Union, who, as members of the infantry of the United States army, may find themselves in the not distant future scrambling across No Man's Land alongside their comrades of the Allied forces, who have already "been over." For them it may perhaps be permitted without presumption to add a word of counsel from one who, though not an infantry soldier, knows something about it. To the time-worn advice of: "Johnnie, get your gun," he would merely add: "And bring your Tanks."

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